

Remarks at the National Governors' Association Dinner

February 22, 1998

Good evening. Governor and Mrs. Voinovich, Governor and Mrs. Carper, ladies and gentlemen, welcome again to the White House. Hillary and I always look forward to this night every year. It brings back a lot of happy memories. And I'm especially glad to have you here this year.

I want to begin by thanking you, all of you, for the contributions that you have made to the success that the United States is now enjoying. The American people have the lowest unemployment rate in 24 years, the lowest crime rate in 24 years, the lowest welfare rolls in 27 years, the lowest inflation rate in 30 years. And a lot of that credit goes to you and the people with whom you work and the commitments that you have made to forge the right kind of government for this new era in which we live. A lot of you work every day at building a government that is smaller but more effective, that works as a catalyst and a partner, does actually give our people the tools they need to make the most of this remarkable time in which we're living.

I also want to say I looked at the document you prepared for your meeting; I read it this afternoon while I was thinking about a few other things, but I enjoyed it very much. And I think it shows that you agree with me that these good times, impose upon us a special obligation to make the most of them, to strengthen our country for the century ahead.

You know, this country was founded by people who came here seeking relief from the arbitrary exercise of absolute power. They thought they had a better idea. They thought that when free people were able to pursue happiness and work to form a more perfect Union, they could build a truly remarkable society. And more than 200 years later, I think we'd all have to admit that they were right.

I have said many times, but I would like to say again, that it seems to me that at every important time in our country's history we have been faithful to the basic ideas of our Founders, no matter what the challenge was. We have always improved America when we

deepen the meaning of our freedom, widen the circle of opportunity, and strengthen the bonds of our Union.

For your contributions to that, I am profoundly grateful. I hope you enjoy this evening. I look forward to tomorrow. And I'd like to ask everyone here to join me in a toast to the Governors of the 50 States and all the territories—[laughter]—and everybody else who is here.

[At this point, a toast was offered.]

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:30 p.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to chairman of the National Governors' Association Gov. George V. Voinovich of Ohio and his wife, Janet; and vice chairman Gov. Tom Carper of Delaware and his wife, Martha.

Remarks at the National Governors' Association Meeting

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Good morning. Governor Voinovich, Governor Carper, Mr. Scheppach, and to the members of the administration that are here, and all the Governors, let me welcome you back to the White House. Before I begin, let me say what I know is on all of our minds—our thoughts and prayers are with the people in central Florida where tornadoes have now killed 28 people. Governor Chiles is going to visit with our FEMA Director, James Lee Witt, the area today, and they will have our concerns with them.

I'd also like to say I'm sorry we're starting a little late, but I've been working on the situation in Iraq. The Vice President and I met with National Security Adviser Berger this morning. Last night, just before our dinner, I spoke with the Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, and I have called Prime Minister Blair this morning; we had a long talk about the situation. I still have to talk to President Yeltsin and President Chirac, and I may have to leave the meeting and then come back. But that's all I have to say now, but I'm sorry we're starting a little late.

I'd like to confine my opening remarks—and I'll try to truncate them since we're starting late—to education. For 20 years now,

Governors have been in the forefront of education reform in the United States. In the late seventies, I was working with Governor Riley and now Senator Bob Graham and Governor Hunt and others in the South who were trying to raise the standard of living in the Southern States to the national average, in part through an improvement in education.

In '83, when President Reagan was here, Secretary Bell issued the Nation at Risk report. In '89, we had the education summit—some of you were there then—which produced the national education goals. In '93, we passed Goals 2000 here and the school-to-work program—I might say both of which have been implemented without a single new Federal regulation, something I'm very proud of.

Last year, in my State of the Union, I outlined a 10-point program in education and asked that we leave politics at the schoolhouse door. And most of that program has now been implemented. I won't go over all of it, but I would just mention three or four issues that I think are important because they relate to many concerns that the Governors have.

First of all, with the increases in Pell grants and 300,000 more work-study positions, with the education IRAs finally giving interest deductions for payments on college loans, the direct loan program, the HOPE scholarship, named after Governor Miller's program in Georgia, and the lifetime learning tax credit, which also applies to the second, the third, and fourth years of college and graduate school, I think we can finally say for the first time in the history of the country, we've opened the doors of college to all Americans. And that's an astonishing achievement for America. And I'm very proud of that. Secondly, we are well on our way to hooking up all the classrooms and libraries in the country to the Internet by the year 2000. And many of you have been very active in that. Thirdly—I'll say a little more about this in a minute—the national standards movement is alive and well. Fourth, we had the America Reads program, which has several thousand college students in all your States going into elementary school classrooms to teach kids to read. And finally, we funded a huge expansion

in the master teacher program, which Governor Hunt has been so active in, and which I think is critically important to the future of education. If we can get a master teacher, a certified master teacher, in every school building in America, it will change the culture and content and results of American education.

Now, in '98, in the State of the Union Address, I asked the American people to focus on the fact that we could be happy that we'd opened the doors of college to everybody, because everyone accepts the fact that we have the best system of higher education in the world—everyone accepts that. No one believes America has the best system of elementary and secondary education in the world. And it seems incongruous. We know that we can have, and I think that should be our goal.

So with a view towards standards, accountability, and expectations all being lifted, our budget in this year makes the largest commitment to K through 12 education in the history of the country—focused largely on reducing class size in the early grades to an average of 18—there are still a lot of classes with 30 kids or more in them—on—therefore, to do that, achieving—helping the States and helping local school districts to hire 100,000 teachers, and helping to build or remodel 5,000 schools.

It focuses on more emphasis on teachers, money for teacher training, and more money to develop a master teacher program. It focuses on standards and the continuation of the voluntary national test development for eighth grade math and fourth grade reading.

I know that later today—and all of you may or may not know this—but I know later today Secretary Riley is going to appoint Governor Engler to the NAGB, the independent board that is supposed to develop a test and that guarantees that the States' concerns will be taken into account. I thank Governor Engler for his willingness to serve. I think it is important that we say whether we use national tests that are somehow evaluated by a national standard, or State tests that are evaluated by a national standard, that we do believe that learning the basics is the same in every State in America, and we want to raise the standards in every State in America. I think that

is terribly important and I think we can do it. And I thank you, Governor, for your willingness to serve.

One other thing I'd like to say about standards. There's an interesting effort underway in America in many States, and in some cities like Chicago, to find a way to end the practice of social promotion in a way that lifts children up instead of putting them down. In Chicago, they have mandatory summer school, for example, for children that don't perform at grade level. And it's, among other things, led to a dramatic drop in juvenile crime in the summer in Chicago, that more and more people are involved in constructive activities.

Before the next school year starts, Secretary Riley will issue guidelines on how schools can end social promotion and boost their efforts to ensure that more students learn what they need to learn the first time around, and then to help those who don't with extra tutoring and summer school.

I also will send to Congress this year legislation to expand the Ed-Flex program. That's the program that frees the States from Federal regulations so long as they set high academic standards, waive their own regulations for local schools, and hold schools accountable for results. There are, I think, a dozen of you now who are part of the Ed-Flex program. The legislation that I will send would make every State in the country eligible to be a part of it, which would dramatically reduce the regulatory burden of the Federal Government on the States in the area of education.

One last thing I'd like to mention, as all of you know, we have been involved now for about 8 months in a national conversation on race. This race initiative, I think, has produced a number of results both in terms of specific programs and in terms of elevating the dialog in the country about how we can deal with our increasing diversity as one America in the 21st century. I'm delighted that this initiative is also working with the YWCA and with Governors to convene statewide days of dialog on race on April 30th. And I want to thank the YWCA—the CEO, Dr. Prema Mathai-Davis, is here today with us this morning—for helping us to launch these dialogs.

Several of the Governors have already agreed to participate in this, and I hope all the Governors will support the days of dialog. Judith Winston, who is the Executive Director of my initiative on race, is also here today and will be happy to talk with you or your representatives more about this effort.

Now, there are a lot of other issues that I know that you want to talk about, but I'll just end where I tried to begin. I think if we get education right, the rest of this will all resolve itself. As I look at where we are with the unemployment rate in the country, with the growth rate, and I ask myself how can we continue to grow, how we can lower the unemployment rate, how can we do it without inflation, the only answer, it seems to me, is to provide higher skill levels to the people in the places that have not yet fully participated in the good times America is enjoying.

I think it is a democratic obligation on us—small “d”—to make our democracy work, and I think it is an economic imperative. So I hope that we can focus on that, but I'm more than eager to talk about whatever else you'd like to discuss.

Governor.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:04 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Raymond C. Scheppach, executive director, National Governors' Association; Gov. Lawton Chiles of Florida; United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan; Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom; President Boris Yeltsin of Russia; President Jacques Chirac of France; former President Ronald Reagan; former Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell; Gov. Zell Miller of Georgia; Gov. James B. Hunt, Jr., of North Carolina; and Gov. John Engler of Michigan. The President also referred to the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB).

Remarks on United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan's Mission to Iraq and an Exchange With Reporters

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The President. Good afternoon. Let me say first that I welcome U.N. Secretary-General Annan's mission to Baghdad. I thank him and his team for their hard work on behalf